

## **USAID Scholar Receives "Exporter of the Year" Award**

Last week Honduran President Manuel Zelaya gave Lina Martinez. USAID Central а American Peace Scholarship (CAPS) recipient, the "Exporter of the Year" Award. Her company, Wabagari Distribution, received the award successfully exporting cassava<sup>1</sup> to New York City under the brand name "O' Big Mama".

The award recognizes the commitment and entrepreneurship of companies that export non-traditional products and create significant occupants apportunities and



Lina Martinez and her group of Garifuna women producers holding the 2009 Exporter of the Year Award.

significant economic opportunities and growth.

Through a USAID-funded CAPS scholarship, Lina Martinez studied Business Administration with emphasis in Marketing at Harding University, Arkansas from 1985 to 1988. Lina returned to Honduras with the vision of generating employment and income for the Garifuna<sup>2</sup> women. Yet, her dream had to be put on hold, since she had three children to raise. It was not until 2004 that she was finally able to work with Garifuna women to produce cassava. By 2006, she had over 300 women producing cassava, but was struggling to export to the United States. "My goal was to create income and employment for the Garifuna women. I wanted the world to see the black women's faces as a sign of hard work and perseverance", said Lina Martinez during the award ceremony.

At the time, people thought of cassava as a nostalgic product with little market potential in the United States. It was not until 2008 when she changed her marketing approach and sold cassava as an exotic product that she succeeded. Since then, her company has been exporting to New York City and exploring new export opportunities in Europe and Japan.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Cassava: A root crop also known as yucca.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Garifuna: A black ethnic community on Honduras's North Coast.